There is too much traffic for Alex to walk to school, so we drive:

There is too much traffic for Alex to walk to school, so we drive: A call to action based on a 42 year trend.

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In 1971 a study of children's travel to and from school focused on five English primary schools.[1] The schools' locations ranged from inner-urban London to a village primary school (ages 4-11). In 1990, the Policy Studies Institute published a follow up study with the same schools and added linked secondary schools (ages 11-16).[2] The results were alarming. Independent active travel was declining steeply—on average, a child in 1990 had to be 2.5 years older than in 1971 to be allowed permissions such as to cross local roads and to travel the school journey without an adult.[1 2]. A further study in 2013 reported further significant shrinkage.[3] We are concerned about the effects this will have for Alex and all young people. (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The school journey

What's the cause?

The drivers of children being kept on a leash are multifaceted, but implicated above all is the dominance of the 'windscreen perspective'—politicians and highway engineers have a driver's perspective. Travel by car, and provision for that, becomes the default choice. Public investment in active travel is far below that on road building, whilst measures such as road tolls and charging are resisted, resulting in a road environment which often feels too risky for walking or cycling.

Car use has been further favoured by changing land use and societal opportunities. Larger facilities at fewer sites bring increased trip lengths, whilst parental choice, including selection of private schools by wealthier families, means that the local school is no longer the default option. The mean UK school travel distance for 11–16 year olds virtually doubled from just over 2 miles in the mid-1980s to almost 3.7 miles in 2013.[4] This is an important change in distance as there is a threshold distance of 3km at which active transport drops precipitously. Minimising a child's independent transport is associated with substantial loss of physical, mental and social health benefits.[5 6] Further, habitual sedentary travel as a child normalises sedentary travel behaviour as an adult. Endemic car use also threatens child health through

the little recognised, but often higher in-vehicle pollutant exposure under urban driving conditions.[7]

What's the solution?

There is no single solution, but children need safe routes to schools which promote and enhance health. This is a choice available to many children in some European countries (e.g. The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark).[8] Importantly, while aspects of programmes in these countries address school travel, for the most part the interventions are town and city-wide. Something fundamental is required, safe routes per se. And this is the crux of our call – multipronged interventions aimed at reducing car use, particularly in urban areas.

In the UK, the Sustainable Travel Towns programme implemented such town-wide measures, with the intention to reduce car use.[9] The programme comprised:

- a strong brand identity
- large-scale personal travel planning
- travel awareness campaigns
- cycling and walking promotion
- public transport information and marketing
- school and workplace travel planning

In the three towns, most schools achieved fewer pupils travelling to school by car. Overall, school journey car use fell by between 9% and 17% whilst active travel to school increased by 2-8%. Casualties from motor vehicle accidents in all three towns also fell with this growth in active travel.

The Sustainable Travel Towns programme cost £15m of which £10m million was Government funding. The UK Government currently has a £20Bn roads programme, partly premised on kick-starting the economy, despite any robust evidence of linkage between roadbuilding and the economy.[10] In contrast, the Sustainable Travel Towns programmes contributed positively to economic growth, reduced carbon emissions, improved health, promoted equality of opportunity, and quality of life[8]. For a fraction of the road building programme cost we could see not just safe routes to schools, but even more importantly, safe routes wholesale across urban areas. Building appropriate infrastructure is important.

Our call to action is simple. Short car journeys to school need to be walking or cycling as the default position. Public transport use often includes walking (and sometimes cycling) and this should be promoted as an alternative to car use as well. We need Sustainable Travel Towns with road space re-allocation to walking and cycling. Transport and Public Health sectors need to collaborate, and national and local funding is required. We call on all decision makers at the national, regional, and municipal levels to take action to promote active travel. This starts with collaboration. Scottish Government must be commended for recently doubling its active travel commitment from £40M to £80M per year.

Alex and their school friends need to enjoy the benefits of active travel to school.

A copy of this article, signed by the authors, has been sent to the Transport Ministers of the four countries of the United Kingdom as a first step in leading this call to action.

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